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CRITICISMS OF SUBMISSION ON EAST TIMOR BY DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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CRITICISMS OF SUBMISSION ON EAST TIMOR BY DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Departmental submission, it could be argued, is a selective, sketchy and disingenuous account of certain aspects of the Timor problem. It is evident from the brief introduction that the authors of this report have no intention of taking up the kind of issues that would provoke criticism of Indonesia. The report is generally protective towards Indonesia and sceptical towards criticism of the Indonesian occupation and administration of the provinces.

If one takes into account that Australian government departments have received a great deal of information about East Timor from intelligence sources, as well as those sources described in the introduction, it is difficult to accept that an accurate assesment about specific developments has really been difficult to arrive at. Government and departmental sources have not hesitated, for example, to make public criticisms of Soviet actions in Afghanistan on the basis of accounts which would be much more difficult to prove than some of the more serious events in East Timor. The biased approach of the Department is revealed in much of the language of its report. For example it quotes information from Indonesian sources without comment or reservation, while reports about infringements of human rights by Indonesia are generally described as "alleged". Distortion occurs in many parts of the report, clearly with the aim of diminishing as much as possible Indonesia's transgressions in relation to East Timor. All sections of this account are thus fashioned in subtle semantics, with the obvious aim of minimising criticism of Indonesia, and not least of Australian government policy as it has evolved since 1974. An examination of the individual sections of the report reveals this aspect of its character.

BACKGROUND

There is considerable emphasis in this section on the

backward and primitive character of conditions in East Timor before Indonesia's intervention. While this account is substantially true, it omits some important considerations. Firstly, it was clear from this writer's experience that in the last decade of Portuguese rule conditions improved quite considerably in a number of important areas. In education, for example, by 1975 more than half the school age children were in primary schools. In health, there had also been significant improvements. In 1975 ICR doctors praised Dili Hospital for its equipment, and for the standard of training of its nurses. There were also many medical centres in districts in the interior. Disease control was much more effective, and, with a higher level of nutrition, the growth of population had increased from 1.5 per cent in the early 60s to about 2 per cent in the mid-70s. It is not altogether true to say that there was no transport system in the last years of Portuguese rule. The roads were certainly gravel, and often rough, but the system provided access to most parts of the Island, with some interruptions during the worst of the wet-season. Much has been made of Indonesian efforts towards agricultural development in parts of East Timor, especially at Maliana and Los Palos, but these projects were already underway during the last years of Portuguese rule. For example, a recent visitor commented on the fact that he had seen twenty tractors at Maliana, but in 1975, before Indonesia's intervention, there were some two dozen tractors at the project.

The statement that East Timor was "gravely under developed by South East Asian standards" needs some qualification. It was certainly very under-developed, when compared with conditions in Malaysia, Singapore or Thailand, but it is when one compares conditions in East Timor with some of the neighbouring areas of Indonesia, that the situation is placed into a more meaningful perspective. In the mid-70s, for example, it could be said that East Timor was just as developed in most respects as the neighbouring Indonesian province of Nusatenggara

Timor. The education system in the Indonesian province may have been more extensive, but whether it was more effective was another matter. Certainly the road system was no better and the standard of living no higher. The shops in East Timor were, if anything, better stocked with lower-priced day-to-day necessities. This sort of comparison needs to be taken into account, when conditions in East Timor prior to 1975 are considered.

Finally, the consequences of Indonesia' military intervention are considered in a somewhat lopsided way. The report notes that life in East Timor was seriously disrupted by "the outbreak of Civil War.... and the subsequent military intervention by Indonesia". This presentation seems to put the civil war on a par with Indonesia's military annexation of the Colony. In fact the civil war lasted for less than one month and, according to the assessment of the International Red Cross Mission in East Timor at the time, cost about one thousand five hundred lives. Although there was some shift of population, only a few areas were affected, and, as this writer can attest from his own experience, living conditions had returned more or less to normal by November 1975. The medical situation was well in hand and Timorese officials were already giving attention to food production and other development tasks. The real upheaval in East Timor had nothing to do with the Civil War. It occurred after Indonesia's invasion, and largely as a consequence of a seemingly callous disregard for the welfare for the Timorese by the invading forces. It also needs to be borne in mind that the civil war itself was without doubt the consequence of Indonesian subversion and meddling in the political affairs of the colony. On the subject of the casualties resulting from the events since 1975, the report appears to make a weak effort to downplay the dimensions of the tragedy in its remark that "the often quoted figure of 100,000 seems exagerated". Why should this figure seem exagerated? Based on Portuguese census figures (and these were

at least as reliably collected as those in Indonesia), East Timor's population would have been no less than about 670,000 on the eve of the invasion, and growing at a rate of about 2 per cent per annum. Yet, earlier this year the Indonesians reported that, at the time of the elections, it was estimated at 559,000. Despite the upheaval of the Civil War, it would have continued to grow. Therefore, even if one acceptes as accurate the Indonesian figures, the loss would have to have been in excess of 100,000 lives. The report speaks of 40,000 Timorese fleeing to West Timor during the civil war during 1975. Subsequent information from Timorese leaders among the refugees suggests that this figure was grossly exaggerated and that no more than 20,000 went to Indonesian Timor. Here it is interesting to note that the authors of this report accept the Indonesian figure of "about 40,000" without qualification while, elsewhere in the report, criticisms of Indonesian behaviour are consistently described as "alleged" or in other sceptical terms.

The task of assessing the loss of life resulting from the upheaval of recent years is a very difficult one. Obviously the Indonesian administration alone has the facilities to conduct a detailed census, but allegations from Timorese church sources - bearing in mind that the church also has traditionally conducted a kind of census of its own - that the Indonesian figures have been deliberately inflated cannot be disregarded. According to a recent article by an American journalist who spent eleven days in East Timor, church officials claim that there are only 425,000 people, and not 559,000, as Indonesia claims. In the view of this writer that figure seems too low, but it is not the first time that such a low figure has surfaced. The writer was informed in 1980 by a senior Indonesian official, who had visited East Timor many times, that the official Indonesian figures had been deliberately inflated, and that only 400,000 people were left in the territory. This kind of assessment seems incredible, but it should be noted that even if one were to accept the

official Indonesian census, the total loss of life, resulting from Indonesia's military invasion of East Timor, and the pacification operations which continued at a high level for the next three years or so, is probably well in excess of 100,000.

INDONESIAN ADMINISTRATION AND POLICIES

The Department's description of the administrative structure in East Timor in fact disguises its real character. It says that the province is "headed by a Governor and Deputy Governor (both East Timorese)", but it is a well recognised fact that the Governor and the Deputy Governor are not the holders of real power. They are largely puppets who are often not consulted at all in the decision-making process. The overall administration and development of East Timor comes under a special committee, which is led by Major General Benny Murdani, a very influential Indonesian general who planned the original military operation to acquire East Timor by force. Murdani, significantly, is also head of military intelligence, and deputy head of the powerful defence intelligence body, Bakin. Indonesians and Timorese alike have told the writer that Murdani's authority was paramount in all major decisions. In Timor itself the most powerful man in the administration is not the Timorese Governor, but Colonel Kalangie, perhaps also a Bakin officer, who holds the post of Sekwilda, or secretary of the regional administration. As the report to the president by the local assembly alleged (and the report is in fact genuine) Kalangie and his deputy often ignored the Timorese in the administration. Indeed the appointment of a Timorese as governor has clearly been little more than a cosmetic touch, clearly designed to make Indonesia's seizure of East Timor more palatable to the international community.

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The Department's report mentions that "administrators and technical experts from other parts of Indonesia have been brought into the province", but then goes on to say that "posts at all levels of the administration are filled by East Timorese..." Once again, this report makes no effort to explain the artificiality of this system. In fact the key departments in East Timor are very much under Indonesian control, and, although senior posts in the district administration may be occupied by East Timorese, real power rests in the hands of the Indonesian military commanders of the respective districts. As the report does in fact point out the territorial military command parallels the civilian administration right down to the village level. The authority of the military commander far outweighs that of Timorese officials in the districts, while in Dili the overall military commander of the province is perhaps the most powerful official. In the past this post was held firstly by Brigadier General Dading Kalbuadi (who, then a Colonel, commanded the attack on Balibo in October 1975), and then by Colonel Sinaga, a Sumatran who on a number of occassions is known to have resorted to harsh methods in his treatment of the Timorese.

Thus to talk about the provincial people's assembly representing the people at the provincial level makes little sense as a measure of the level of democracy in the province. True, general elections took place in East Timor in May 1982 but, from a number of reports, the election was anything but a free expression of Timorese political views. Indeed, according to a recent article in the authoritative "Asian Wall Street Journal", in the first count the pro-government party, Golkar, gained 100.5 per cent of the votes.

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POLICIES

The report makes much of Indonesian government activites aimed to promote the development of East Timor. It needs of course to be acknowledged that in recent years there has been a considerable emphasis on development, and that a number of important projects are underway. The whole development scenario, however, calls for a much more critical examination than the Department of Foreign Affairs has given it in this report. In the first place it appears to have been motivated by less than altruistoc considerations. As the Asian Wall Street Journal reported on 14 June, Indonesian sources had admitted that they "have been advised by allies that the best way to avoid continuing rebuke in the U.N. is to establish a solid development record". Also, it is interesting to note that some of the focal areas of development are more closely related to Indonesia's special interests in the matter than to the well-being of the Timorese. The strong emphasis on education, for example, is obviously designed to hasten the "Indonesianization" of East Timor. The housing program will no doubt benefit some Timorese, but a large proportion of them are said to be for Indonesians who have been brought into the territory for one reason or another, and for those Timorese officials in the administration. Certain areas, such as Maliana and Los Palos are the settings for important agricultural projects, but according to recent reports thousands of Indonesians are being brought in from Java and Bali to work on these undertakings, and presumably to settle permanently in the area. According to a recent article in the "Asian Wall Street Journal" many of the development funds will end up in Indonesian pockets. Here it is important to note that a single powerful Indonesian-dominated company has assumed control of much of the economic activity in the province. That company is P. T. Denok Hernandez International, which is reportedly owned by a number of senior Indonesian military officers. In this context it might be noted that one of the

major road development projects is between Dili and Ermera, the main centre of the coffee industry, which is now virtually controlled by P.T. Denok. Therefore, it is far from clear just how much benefit from this considerable development investment will actually trickle down to the ordinary Timorese. None of these considerations has been raised by the Foreign Affairs submission.

It is noteworthy that the submission refers to a DPR report, contending that the Indonesian government's development activities will embrace all aspects of the people's lives. It does not refer to the report to the President by the Timorese DPR members, which became the subject of some controversy last year. That particular report, which according to this writers investigations is quite genuine, drew attention to the syphoning off of development funds by Indonesian officials, including officials like Colonel Kalangie. It is seems that this Timorese appeal fell on deaf ears in Jakarta. Colonel Kalangie remains unchallenged in his position while the two Timorese signatories to the appeal spent a month or so in an Indonesian prison for their trouble.

Indonesian efforts towards economic developments in the province are clearly undeniable, but the evidence so far raises many questions about the kind of development that is taking place. What will better roads in certain areas mean to Timorese, who can barely afford to use the vehicles that pass over them, let alone afford to buy cars? The introduction of television, the construction of government offices, and improved air strips are luxuries or side benefits, which will do little to improve the welfare of the ordinary Timorese.

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LIVING CONDITIONS

The sub-section on re-settlement ignores the tremendous upheaval the forcing of Timorese into re-settlement centres has caused. east timor used to be a land of hundreds of tiny hamlets, ranging in size from 4 to 10 houses. The forcing of the Timorese into large resettlement centres (and there are now more than 150 of them) has clearly enormously disrupted local cultural patterns, as well as traditional agriculture. True, some of the former agricultural methods were wasteful, but in the mountain regions this was not always the case. There is evidence that these measures, which were designed rather more for security than for welfare purposes and the re-fashioning of East Timor's agricultural economy, have led to a severe reduction in the level of food production. In the last years of Portuguese rule, East Timor nearly always managed to produce enough food to feed a population much larger than the numbers now inhabiting the province. But, according to information from Indonesian as well as Timorese sources, the new centres have removed Timorese from many of the fertile valleys and hill slopes, causing much arable land to be lost. The departmental submission claims that the centres "have enabled greater access to schools, health facilities and so on". This may be so, but it is important to bear in mind that, as International Red Cross officials were to discover in 1979, health conditions in the re-settlement centres were worse than among the Timorese who had not yet been forced into these communities. There is much evidence that the Timorese are not free to move from settlement to settlement, nor to leave the settlements for their former residences, in spite of the comment in this submission that the exent to which this restriction exists is unclear.

The submission's comments on the style of food production in East Timor prior to 1975, ignore the fact that before Indonesia's intervention the Territory was virtually

self-sufficient. During the brief Fretilin interregmun some agricultural development took place, especially in the mountain areas. It is noteworthy that in the first years of Indonesian rule the food situation in the mountain areas under Fretilin control, was rather better than in the areas occupied by Indonesia. It should of course be admitted that the traditional Timorese agricultural techniques were somewhat primitive by most South East Asian standards, but efforts to improve the system had been commenced by the Portuguese, and by the Timorese themselves, long before Indonesia's intervention. It was the Indonesian "pacification" operations between 1976 and 1979 that devastated the pattern of agricultural activity and not merely the events of 1975 and 1976. In 1977 and 1978, for example, Indonesian forces deliberately set out in their "search and destroy" operations to curtail food production in the mountain regions, in their efforts to crush the resistance to integration. Thus, the present food crisis is a legacy not of Portuguese neglect, but of Indonesia's campaign to force the Timorese to submit to their rule.

The Department's assessment is that "no famine or general food crisis exists or is impending" in East Timor. In spite of the access its representatives have had to the territory this assessment remains, in the writers view, unconvincing. It has been contradicted again and again by other sources, and not merely by Monsignor da Costa Lopes. Perhaps there was no famine at the time of the Whitlam-Hastings visit, but then food production in East Timor is at its peak at that time of the year and, with a much reduced population, it is hard to believe that famine conditions as such could then have existed anywhere in the province. After July this year the situation could well have deteriorated. Of particular relevance is the recent article by Rod Nordland, a staff writer of the "Philadelphia Inquirer", who has just spent 11 days in East Timor, during which time he appears to have made a closer and more sensitive study of the situation than have other recent

visitors. It seems that the Departmental submission is based largely on information provided to Australia's representatives by Indonesian officials, than on a detached critical assessment of the position. The submission also quotes the U.S. C.R.S., but the latter organization is hardly an impartial body. For years it has been an apologist for Indonesia's actions in East Timor, to the irritation of other U.S. Catholic organizations. Also, its officials are mostly located in Jakarta, with its field operations being carried out by Indonesian teams. The position of the I.C.R.C. is somewhat amibiguous, but it is the writers understanding that Red Cross officials are not prepared to say that there is no risk of famine in the future. It must be remembered that the International Red Cross is traditionally reluctant to make comments on sensitive political issues. Its aim in this case is to remain in East Timor, and it is therefore unlikely to make statements which might provoke criticisms of the performance of the Indonesian administration of the province.

In health, the submission talks about East Timor now having three hospitals, implying that these did not exist before. In fact these three man medical centres did exist in Portuguese times, and in the last years of Poruguese rule there were some 22 doctors in the territory.

As has already been noted, the paragraph on housing illustrates the biased character of the submission. The first sentence refers to "the destruction of property during the civil war period and subsequent population dislocation", suggesting in a totally misleading way that the civil war was responsible for most of this form of destruction. In fact as the civil war lasted for less than a month with most of the fighting occurring away from major towns and villages the destruction of housing was minimal. It was only after Indonesia's invasion that this kind of destruction reached serious proportions. Hundreds of villages were destroyed as Indonesian troops advanced throught the

territory, many of them as the result of air raids or rocket attacks.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

Somehow in this section the author has managed to ignore the crux of the Timor problem. Reports of summary executions, disappearances, killings, torture, detention without trial and so on, about which there is now a vast volume of evidence, are treated as "allegations which, the department is not able to prove or disprove..." The best the report can do is to note a bland statement by the Indonesian representative to the U.N. Commission of Human Rights that efforts were being made to prevent excesses in East Timor, which the representative attributed to Fretilin terrorist actions or reprisals by the local population. It would seem that the Department has studiously avoided making a close examination of this question. In this context, it may be recalled that in 1977, after the writer had presented a report on the allegations by Timorese refugees in Portugal, it was stated that Australian officials had not themselves investigated these allegations, and had no intention of doing so.

On the question of disappearances, it is noted that there is now an agreement between the ICRC and Indonesia for the establishment of a mailing and tracing service in East Timor. It might be pointed out that, when the International Red Cross first resumed their work in East Timor, they were unable to obtain Indonesia's permission to carry out this important role.

The section of the submission dealing with detainees is yet another example of subtle bias. It refers to the "widely divergent reports of the number of persons under detention in East Timor", without providing any details from other than

I.C.R.C. sources. Yet there is some evidence that the I.C.R.C. team in East Timor (all of whom are Indonesian's except for two or three Swiss representatives) has had access to only some of the prisoners under detention. Further, the submission glosses over the fact that the Timorese under detention have been detained without trial and, if as reported several hundred died on Atauro last year from severe gastro-enteritis, their nutrition was clearly very seriously neglected.

In the freedom of movement section the last paragraph needs some clarification. Presumably the 650 Timorese who are described as having already come to Australia "under relaxed humanitarian programs" came from Portugal and not from East Timor. The further 1,700 Timorese whose entry into Australia has been approved are presumably also in Portugal. The submission does not mention that most, if not all, of the 357 Timorese who have managed to get to Australia were forced to pay bribes, usually at the rate of about $1,000 per person in order to procure their exit documents.

The submission refers to the East Timor DPRD report as "alleged", but there can no longer be any real doubt that the document is genuine. There is no attempt to analyse this particular document in any meaningful way. Clearly the DPRD members addressed the President in the most extravagent terms in the hope of soliciting his interest in their cause. The departmental submission merely states that its claims "would appear to have a political motive relating to internal politics in East Timor". From even a cursory reading of this document it is evident that the authors sought to convey to the Indonesian President a grim picture of the human rights situation in the province. It clearly, if indirectly implicated senior military officials in East Timor, including Colonel Kalangie himself.

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THE UNITED NATIONS

The submission's account of the Timor question in the UN is a very bland one, which skirts around sensitive, but crucial aspects of the problem. The UN special envoy's mission, for example, was deliberately frustrated by the Indonesian authorities, as the CIA assessments of the time openly acknowledged (see "The Timor Papers", part two, "The National Times"). The submission tells us nothing about the devious Indonesian moves to carry out a contrived act of free choice.

On the question of the Portuguese approach, the department's submission omits important developments that have occurred recently, although Australia has an Embassy in Lisbon in a position to monitor them. The Timor question was discussed with the Pope during his recent visit, and President Eanes has now taken an active interest in the question, assisted by the former Portuguese Prime Minister, Senhora Pintassilgo. Nor does the submission mention that the Portuguese proposal calls for a number of countries, including Australia, the United States, China and the Netherlands to assist them to work out a solution to the problem. At least one approach has been made to the Australian government, although it seems that the government responded coolly.

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AUSTRALIAN POLICY

It is far from clear to what extent Australia pressed its opposition to Indonesia's use of force in 1975. Also, Australia is described as having "supported UN involvement in finding a solution to the situation that developed .... in 1975". Was Australia's support really strong? It could well be argued that our efforts in support of the special envoy's mission were somewhat half-hearted.

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